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# An Exploration of the Needs of Students Who Attend an Alternative Junior High School

Chrislee Jacobs  
*Augsburg College*

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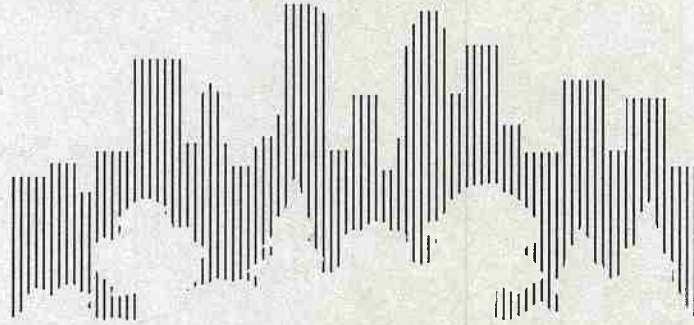
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**MASTERS IN SOCIAL WORK  
THESIS**

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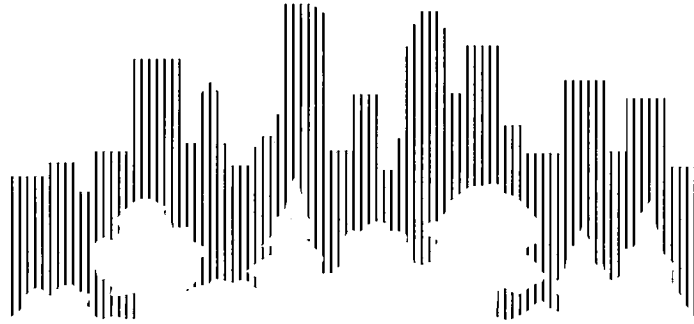
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1996

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**1996**

**AN EXPLORATION OF THE NEEDS OF STUDENTS  
WHO ATTEND AN ALTERNATIVE  
JUNIOR HIGH SCHOOL**

By  
**Chrislee Jacobs**

**A thesis submitted to the graduate faculty of Augsburg College in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree Master of Social Work.**

**MINNEAPOLIS, MINNESOTA  
MAY, 1996**

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MASTER OF SOCIAL WORK  
AUGSBURG COLLEGE  
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**CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL**

This is to certify that the Master's thesis of:

Chrislee Jacobs

has been approved by the Examining Committee for the thesis requirements for the  
Master of Social Work Degree.

Date of Oral Presentation:

Thesis Committee: Carl Palm, Ph.D.

Thesis Advisor

Maureen A. Walsh

Thesis Reader

Kendra Deveny, Ph.D.

Thesis Reader

This work is dedicated to our youth.

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## **ABSTRACT OF THESIS**

### **AN EXPLORATION OF THE NEEDS OF STUDENTS WHO ATTEND AN ALTERNATIVE JUNIOR HIGH SCHOOL**

**CHRISLEE JACOBS**

**MAY, 1996**

The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine the needs of students who attend Plymouth Christian Youth Center's (PCYC) alternative junior high school, which is located in North Minneapolis. Previous research indicates that students who attend alternative schools may be dealing with a multitude of issues, and therefore, have a wide array of needs which must be addressed. Due to the unique characteristics of alternative schools, these school environments seem to more efficiently meet the needs of their students. Existing literature suggests that when students' needs are met, their school experience will be more satisfying and successful.

Data for this study was gathered during face to face interviews with fourteen junior high students between the ages of 13 and 15. Questions focused on how well PCYC was addressing students physiological, safety, belonging and self-esteem needs, as well as allowing students' to provide feedback on how PCYC can better meet their needs. The findings indicate that PCYC students believe that their physiological and belonging needs are adequately being met at school. In addition, the finding suggest that PCYC may want to utilize existing program strengths and resources in order to more effectively address student needs with respect to safety and esteem.



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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

#### Statement of Problem

This research evaluates how well the needs of students enrolled in an alternative junior high school at Plymouth Christian Youth Center (PCYC) are being addressed.

#### Background of Problem

Contemporary youth are faced with numerous issues including drugs, single-parent families, teen parenting and violence. Because of these issues, many youth struggle with poor school attendance, low academic performances and school dropouts.

Currently, one in four students will not graduate from high school (Kershaw & Blank, 1993, p.1). The national drop-out rate is roughly 25%, while in many large cities this figure is closer to 50% (Constant, 1992, p.6). The drop-out rate for African Americans is approximately 25%, while for Whites and Asian Americans, the rate of drop-out, is about 15% (Baldwin, Moffett & Lane, 1992, p.358).

Unfortunately, traditional schools are unable to completely satisfy the needs of these at-risk students. In order to educate at-risk students, it is crucial that attention be given to their unique psychological and socio-cultural characteristics. One way public and private educational leaders are responding to this need is by the development of alternative schools.

#### Purpose and Significance of the Research Problem

Minneapolis has several alternative schools serving at-risk students. Plymouth Christian Youth Center (PCYC) is a social service agency located in North Minneapolis,

which offers an alternative junior high school. Since this is a relatively new program, it should have the opportunity to develop on the basis of the needs of the student population.

Interviews incorporating Maslow's hierarchy of basic needs were conducted with PCYC students. The information collected will assist in providing suggestions for program planning and the determining of in-school and community services which may need to be incorporated into PCYC junior high program. By having knowledge regarding the specific needs of the students who attend PCYC junior high, the teachers and social worker will be able to work with students on a more holistic approach to provide a satisfying school experience.

#### School Context in North Minneapolis

Based on the drop-out rate in North Minneapolis, the development of successful alternative programs is crucial. According to the 1990 census data (U.S. population), North Minneapolis is one of five Minnesota districts with the highest drop-out rates. It is estimated that as many as 30% of youth ages 16-19 in North Minneapolis are school drop-outs, while suburban drop-out rates are as low as 5% (District Data Book, 1993).

North Minneapolis has the highest for unemployment as well as poverty rates in the state (District Data Book, 1993). The 1993 State of the City report shows that Near North Minneapolis has the highest number of households receiving public assistance (3,618), the highest number of births to women with less than a high-school education (1,302) and the second highest number of births to unmarried mothers (2,048).

## Overview of Plymouth Christian Youth Center

Plymouth Christian Youth Center, located in North Minneapolis, is a non-profit human service organization currently serving youth and families through three divisions: education, social services and camping. PCYC is a member of the United Way of Minneapolis, the Minneapolis Federation of Alternative Schools, and is an affiliate social service agency of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.

PCYC's mission is to "help children and youth achieve healthy personal growth and full participation as citizens of our community and world" (Plymouth Christian Youth Center 1995, Annual Report). The young people upon which they focus much of their work are those in the inner-city of Minneapolis who are facing significant barriers in life as they strive toward full growth and active citizenship.

Plymouth Christian Youth Center junior high alternative school currently serves thirty-four male and female students. These students are from the ages of 13-15 and come from diverse cultural and socio-economic backgrounds. The staff at PCYC consists of three full-time teachers, a full-time social worker and a part-time support teacher. PCYC provides: (1) smaller classroom sizes compared to the public school systems; (2) smaller teacher-to-student ratios compared to the public school systems; (3) individualized goals; (4) hands on learning; (5) community involvement; and (6) monthly course selections.

The junior high school day begins at 8:30 a.m. and runs until 3:00 p.m., Monday through Thursday. Fridays are shorter days, running from 8:30 a.m. to 12:30 p.m.

A typical day is as follows:

8:30 - 9:15	Skills Building
9:15 - 9:25	Breakfast
9:25 - 10:10	Academic Class
10:10 - 10:55	Advisory
11:00 - 11:45	Academic class
11:45 - 12:30	Academic Class
12:30 - 1:00	Lunch
1:00 - 3:00	Elective Classes

In the first hour, Skills Building, students work on various skills needed to be successful in school. Academic classes consist of the necessary math, English, science, health and history requirements. Advisory period is a time for students to meet in small groups with their assigned advisor to talk about issues or concerns while developing positive relationships with an adult staff and student peers. Afternoon elective courses offer students classes such as art, community projects, or physical education. Courses run for one month after which the course topics are changed.

#### Research Questions

The first two research questions are general questions which guided the literature search.

- What are the needs of students who attend alternative schools?
- Are alternative schools meeting the needs of their students?

Questions specific to this research include:

- What are the needs of the students who attend PCYC's alternative junior high school?
- Are the students who are attending PCYC's junior high getting their needs met?
- How can PCYC more effectively meet the needs of its students?

## CHAPTER II

### LITERATURE REVIEW

In order to address the research questions, particular dimensions were chosen to study students' needs within alternative schools. This chapter looks at (a) the history of alternative education, (b) characteristics of alternative school students, (c) characteristics of alternative schools, (d) positive and negative aspects of alternative schools, and (e) existing studies pertaining to alternative schools and students' needs.

#### History of Alternative Education

The alternative school movement began in the late 1960's at a time when popular ideals emphasized egalitarianism and participatory decision-making, and when there was a great push to increase the participation of minorities in all phases of life (Ascher, 1982). By 1981, 80% of the nation's larger school districts had alternative schools (Ascher, 1982). Alternative schools are characterized by a variety of rationales designed to serve different client groups and provide a variety of educational alternatives in order to meet specific and often locally perceived needs (Reilly & Reilly, 1983). By basing development on individual and local needs, strong community support has been often generated.

The options for alternative school programs are varied. Reilly and Reilly (1983) identified three types of alternative schools: (1) nonpublic (for example, parochial, military); (2) upper-socioeconomic preparatory schools for wealthy and college-bound students; and (3) compensatory schools that serve students who do not function well in traditional schools (for example, behavior-disordered students, potential drop-outs).

Most alternative schools fall into the third category and have been directed toward those students with attendance or discipline problems who are potential or actual dropouts.

Over the past 20 years, the number of alternative school programs for at-risk youths have rapidly increased (Franklin, 1992). More than 15,000 alternative public schools are in operation today, with average enrollment of 50-200 students (Parrett, 1993).

Alternative programs have persisted well into the '90's and many of them now exist as special units in public schools for youth who may otherwise have dropped out.

#### Characteristics of Alternative School Students, Potential Drop-Outs and At-Risk Youth

Students at risk have been identified as being unlikely to earn a diploma in the traditional school setting, as well as those whose needs are not adequately being met by the educational system (Conant, 1992). At-risk students typically struggle with one or more of the following obstacles to academic success: pregnancy, parenting, premature emancipation, financial responsibility, chemical abuse, family difficulties, abuse, truancy or inappropriate patterns of behavior (Conant, 1992; Wehlage, 1991).

Relying on specific characteristics and stereotypes neglects the actual diversity among alternative school students. Due to the lack of consistency in reports in describing characteristics of alternative students and drop-outs, the notion is supported that these programs serve young people of varying abilities, races and socioeconomic backgrounds (Franklin & Streeter, 1992; Franklin, 1992). According to Natriello, Pallas, and McDill (1986), Rumberger (1987), Franklin (1992a) and Franklin (1992b), youth who drop-out of school or attend alternative schools are predominately lower income and minorities. Some alternative schools may serve students who are lower functioning, behind in



academics and have lower intelligence than those students in the traditional schools (Franklin, 1992a). Within the past fifteen years, however, there has been a trend toward a substantial increase in dropouts and alternative school students who are white, middle class, rural and high achieving youth (Franklin, 1992a; Franklin, McNeil & Wright, 1990).

### Characteristics of Alternative Schools

Alternative school students consists of a wide range of socio-economic and cultural backgrounds with specific needs, and therefore, alternative schools have distinct characteristics: small numbers of students, students involved in decision making, informal settings, flexible learning environments, parental involvement, individualized learning, teachers with a variety of roles, intimate environments, concern for non-cognitive goals, close teacher/student relationships, a sense of community, high attendance, high staff morale, an openness to the outside community, few rules and regulations, teacher empowerment, and site-based management (Abbott, 1994; Arnové & Stout, 1980; Foley, 1983; Franklin, 1992a; Gold & Mann, 1982; Kleinbard, 1983; Lieberman, 1977 and Raywid, 1983, 1984).

### Positive Aspects of Alternative Schools

Historically, schooling in the United States has been characterized by a building containing classrooms and teachers where students go for instruction. In these settings, most students seldom experience any feelings of power or influence on what occurs in the school (Parrett, 1983). One of the strengths of alternative schools is the creation of environments in which different students' needs can be met, while realizing students'

unique strengths and potentials (Arnove & Strout, 1980; Asher, 1982). The research suggests that students' needs cluster around three factors: belonging, safety and self-esteem.

### Belonging

Effective alternative schools provide students with environments conducive to establishing friendships with peers and adults, while fostering feelings of belonging to a group (Wehtage, 1991). A student who is integrated into the life of the school is generally believed to find school more rewarding in terms of informal relationships and feelings of self-worth through responsibility (Arnove & Strout, 1980). Small scale schools with low student-adult ratios provide the necessary environment for more intimate interactions between teacher and student. These environments provide a sense of community where individual needs can be recognized (Arnove & Strout, 1980). Alternative schools often have some form of open agenda, such as small group activities, as a regular part of their schedule. These small groups are the focus for the added effective emphasis that is part of the alternative school curricula (Gregory & Smith, 1982).

### Safety

Alternative schools differ markedly from conventional schools regarding discipline and disruption. Because alternative schools usually have small, informal settings, they have a minimum of rules (Gregory & Smith, 1982). Although alternative schools have fewer rules and function in open settings, when compared to traditional schools, they appear to have higher levels of order and organization (Trickett, 1978).

Students who have moved from conventional to alternative schools experience fewer incidences of disruption, absenteeism and truancy. (Barr, Colsten & Parrett, 1977; Duke & Muzio, 1978).

### Self-Esteem

In comparison with conventional schools alternative schools encourage more student participation in decisions that affect their own programs, as well as those of the school. This sharing in the decision-making process provides students with a sense of school or program ownership, facilitates personal responsibility, and encourages self-confidence and intrinsic motivation (Parrett, 1983). Many alternative programs provide a supportive and accepting environment where students can succeed and experience a sense of control over their lives, which enhances self-concept (Asher, 1982; Arnove & Strout, 1980). Gold (1978) hypothesized that alternative programs administered by warm, accepting teachers who focus on successful versus unsuccessful experiences of the students will be effective programs. Alternative school environments more often than traditional school environments tend to focus on students' positive achievements, which plays an important role in students' self-esteem.

### Negative Aspects of Alternative Schools

Alternative schools have great potential for effectively working with students who have been unsuccessful in traditional schools. There are limits, however, to the effectiveness of such programs. These negative aspects may have an effect on how well an alternative school is able to meet a student's needs. Arnove & Strout (1980) found the

following limiting and negative factors of alternative schools: labeling and stigmatizing, racial isolation, tracking and channeling, and social control.

### Labeling and Stigmatizing

Alternative schools are often perceived as dumping grounds or warehouses for every misfit and academically incompetent youth. These labels may have a negative impact on students who are attending alternative schools, reinforcing the development and maintenance of low self-esteem (Arnove & Strout, 1980).

### Racial Isolation

In many school districts across the country, alternative schools are being equated with alternatives to school suspension. As a higher percentage of minority students are suspended or excluded from schools, these alternatives, in effect, may become enclaves for minority students (Arnove & Strout, 1980). Isolation further occurs when certain alternative programs are considered to be for members of a particular race or ethnic group.

### Dumping and Channeling

There seems to be strong indications that the twin phenomena of "dumping" and "creaming" are occurring through the use of alternative schools (Arnove & Strout, 1980). The "dumping" phenomena is the process by which teachers, administrators, and counselors get rid of the trouble makers by referring them to alternative programs. In effect, alternative schools may become compounds for keeping students off the streets and out of trouble. In regards to "channeling", alternative programs may be preparing

students who are largely from minority and low-income backgrounds for the lower rungs of the social and economic hierarchies of American society (Arnove & Strout, 1980).

### Social Control

Pedagogues employed in alternative programs result in social control. To control students, token economies or peer group pressure are often used (Arnove & Strout, 1980). In addition, students who are referred to an alternative program due to suspension or exclusion often have little or no choice in their school opportunities. Many students are assigned to these programs by juvenile courts and probation officers, or they are referred by counselors (Arnove & Strout, 1980). Therefore alternative schools may represent yet another place to confine students, rather than to positively interact with them.

### Existing Studies

Several studies have been conducted reviewing alternative schools and students' needs. Kershaw and Blank (1993) conducted a study in order to determine the perceptions of students, teachers, guidance counselors and administrators regarding their experiences in an alternative school setting and to make comparisons with their experiences in traditional schools.

The study provided the following six findings: (1) students are assigned to the alternative school setting for a wide range of reasons; (2) the smaller more supportive and more structured environments of the alternative schools have positive effects on student academic and behavioral improvements; (3) close student/faculty relationships at the alternative schools have a positive effect on student performance; (4) students feel that the support from counselors at the alternative schools has a major impact on their ability

to control their anger; (5) classwork varies at the alternative schools; and (6) alternative school teachers perceive their roles to be different from the roles of traditional school teachers.

Smith, Gregory and Pugh's (1981) study, "The Statements about Schools"(SAS) measured how well alternative schools were meeting the needs of their students and then compared their success in meeting student needs with the success of conventional school programs. The SAS inventory was developed as a way to measure needs based on Maslow's hierarchy.

Alternative school students and teachers reported that their schools are doing a better job than conventional schools of meeting the needs of their students. Alternative school students and conventional students share a common ideal of the degree to which schools ought to help them grow as human beings. Teachers in both kinds of schools agree about what each of their schools should be doing to meet students' needs. Alternative school students were far more satisfied with their growth opportunities in the areas of friendship, belonging, achievement and self-actualization than were conventional school students. In addition, they were as satisfied as their conventional school counterparts with the amount of control and order in their schools.

Griffin (1993) conducted research to investigate the perceptions of at-risk students of their educational environments. A Likert-type scale was used to determine if a significant difference exists between students' perceptions of their previous high school experiences in a traditional program, and their perceptions of the alternative school program.

The research found that students felt that alternative school teachers were more concerned about them than teachers at traditional schools. Smaller classes, lower total number of students in the school or lower teacher-pupil ratio are possible causes of these perceptions. The students also perceived that teachers were less authoritarian at the alternative school than at the traditional high school, implying that students desire a non-threatening school environment. Students perceived themselves as having more input in decision-making at the alternative school. They believed that teachers in the alternative school were more enthusiastic about their jobs. Overall, students were more satisfied with the alternative school than with the traditional school.

Reddy, Langmeyer and Asch's (1978) exploratory study was designed to evaluate the psychological correlates of student adjustment at New Morning, an alternative school, in an attempt to expand the base of empirical information about alternative education. The following questions were addressed: (a) How well adjusted are the students to New Morning? (b) To what characteristics of New Morning are they adjusted? Four psychological correlates of student adjustment were identified: general self-concept, school self-image, satisfaction and involvement.

With respect to self-concept, the study found that, in general, New Morning students scored closer to the norm than regular students. When compared to traditional students, New Morning students scored higher on self-image. New Morning students were very satisfied with their school. In particular, they were highly satisfied with the non-traditional learning styles. The findings, however, show that their personal and social needs were not fully met at the alternative school. In general, the expectations that

New Morning students would have a higher self-concept, and that they would be more satisfied with their school than traditional students, was confirmed by the findings.

### Implications to This Research

The current research evidences that, when compared to traditional schools, alternative schools are more successfully meeting their students' needs. The research indicates that students who attend alternative schools have different needs than students who attend traditional schools. The structure and philosophy of alternative schools appears better able to serve students who may be dealing with truancy or behavior problems. In addition, the research supports the belief that, in order to have an effective program, it is necessary to have keen insight and knowledge of the needs of the students whom the program is serving.



## CHAPTER III

### THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

A review of the literature suggests that alternative school students tend to have specific needs, which may be addressed within the alternative schools due to their unique characteristics. When educational systems are familiar with the needs of their students, it seems the students feel their school experience is more satisfying. In order to delineate these specific needs, this research is based on Abraham Maslow's motivation theory, William Glasser's control theory, and Erik Erikson's fifth development stage: identity versus role confusion.

#### Abraham Maslow's Motivation Theory

Abraham Maslow believed individuals are integrated and organized beings who are motivated by the need to be fulfilled. Motivation, then, is the study of the ultimate human goals, desires or needs. These basic needs arrange themselves in a fairly definite hierarchy: an individual's higher needs cannot be met until the lower needs are met (Maslow, 1970). See Table 3.1.

Table 3.1

#### Maslow's Needs Hierarchy



(Monte, 1991, p.685)

### Physiological Needs

Maslow believed the starting point for motivational theory is the physiological needs. These needs - hunger, thirst and fatigue - are relatively independent of each other and are the most potent of all needs. When these needs are satisfied, new needs emerge.

### Safety Needs

According to Maslow (1970), safety needs revolve around one's security, stability, dependency, protection, freedom from fear, anxiety and chaos, and the need for structure, order, law and limits. An indication of a child's need for safety is his/her preference for some type of undisrupted routine. Children seem to want a predictable, lawful and orderly world (Maslow, 1970). Injustice, unfairness or inconsistency tends to make a child feel anxious and unsafe. Young children thrive better under a system that has at least a skeletal outline of rigidity, in which there is a schedule of some kind (Maslow, 1970).

### Belonging Needs

Belonging needs can be defined as one's hunger for affectionate relationships with people, for a sense of a place within a group, and intimacy (Maslow, 1970). When these are not met, one may experience feelings of loneliness, rejection, ostracism, friendlessness and rootlessness (Maslow, 1970). Moving and/or changing schools may cause children to feel a lack of roots in addition to a sense of disorientation.

### Esteem Needs

Maslow (1970) defines esteem needs as the desire for a stable, firmly based, high evaluation of oneself, for self-respect and for the esteem of others. In addition, he views

esteem needs as a desire for strength, achievement, recognition, sense of importance, adequacy and mastery. The satisfaction of these needs leads to self-confidence, self-worth and a sense of being useful in the world. If these are not met, one may experience feelings of inferiority, weakness or helplessness (Maslow, 1970).

#### William Glasser's Control Theory

Glasser (1986) believes that if we structure schools to satisfy basic human needs, students will be less susceptible to destructive influences in their lives and will come to see school as a need-satisfying place. By addressing students' needs, schools can reduce discipline problems while increasing learning. Control theory teaches students about their needs and that they must make choices to satisfy those needs. In addition, control theory focuses on the students ability to evaluate their choices in order to make good choices (Brant, 1988).

Glasser (1986) believes that children's needs continue to exist in the classroom, therefore schools should look to satisfy the following needs; sense of belonging, sense of power, personal importance, freedom and fun. If these needs are not addressed, and schools do not pay attention to what students' need, Glasser believes we will continue to have trouble teaching the basics successfully (Brant, 1988).

#### Erik Erikson's: Identity versus Role Confusion

Erikson's conception of the life cycle focuses on a series of sequential ego crises that began in infancy and extend through life to old age (Monte, 1991). In order for human development to proceed, one must have successful resolution of each developmental phase.

Erikson's fifth stage of development: identity versus role confusion, occurs during puberty and adolescence when all continuities relied on earlier are more or less questioned (Erikson, 1963). It is a time when childhood ends and adolescents are faced with role experimentation leading towards adulthood. Adolescence is thought to be a time to integrate all the conflicting self-images, that have developed since infancy, in some formal procedure (Monte, 1991).

A danger in this stage is "role confusion" (Erikson, 1963). During this stage, delinquent behavior is common as many youth struggle with their identity (Erikson, 1963). In the interest of achieving identity and reducing confusion, adolescents may at times temporarily over-identify to the point of loss of identity, with the heroes of cliques or crowds (Erikson, 1963). Adolescents develop their own formal rituals of belonging which can be distinguished by clothes and music, for example. Exclusion of those who are different is common as such intolerance is a defense against a sense of identity confusion (Erikson, 1963). At this stage of development, it is crucial for adolescents to feel as if they belong to a generation of youth separate from adults (Monte, 1991).

## CHAPTER IV

### METHODOLOGY

In the context of Maslow's motivation theory, William Glasser's control theory, and Erikson's theory of human development, the methodology of this study was designed in order to determine how well junior high alternative students' needs were being addressed by Plymouth Christian Youth Center.

#### Specific Research Questions

The specific research questions posed are:

- What are the needs of the students who attend Plymouth Christian Youth Center (PCYC) junior high school?
- Are students who attend PCYC's alternative junior high school getting their needs met?
- How can PCYC more effectively meet the needs of their students?

#### Definition of Terms

In order to address the research questions, terms need consistent and measurable definitions. In this research, alternative schools are defined as compensatory schools that serve students who do not function well in traditional schools (Reilly & Reilly, 1983). These types of alternative schools are directed towards those students with attendance or discipline problems, who are potential or actual dropouts.

A "junior high student" is defined here by age rather than by academic grade level, as many of the students at PCYC are behind in actual grade level. Therefore, a junior high student is one who is at least 13 years old, but is no more than 16 years old.

This study addresses physiological, safety, belonging and esteem needs. Physiological needs pertain to students' levels of hunger and fatigue. Safety needs

consist of the needs for a stable, orderly and controlled environment that minimizes physical and psychological threats, while fostering a sense of well-being. The need for belonging can be defined by the extent to which a school provides opportunities for students to establish friendships with peers and adults and fosters feelings of belonging to a group. Finally, self-esteem is defined as how well the school helps students feel capable of being successful and reaching important levels of achievement.

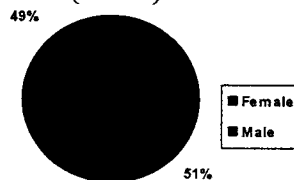
### Research Design

In order to answer the questions, a qualitative research method was employed. This research method is known as an interview guide approach where the researcher interviews the respondents face to face with specific open ended questions. (Rubbin & Babbie, 1993). Interviews took place with each subject individually in a confidential place provided at PCYC.

### Characteristics of the Study Population

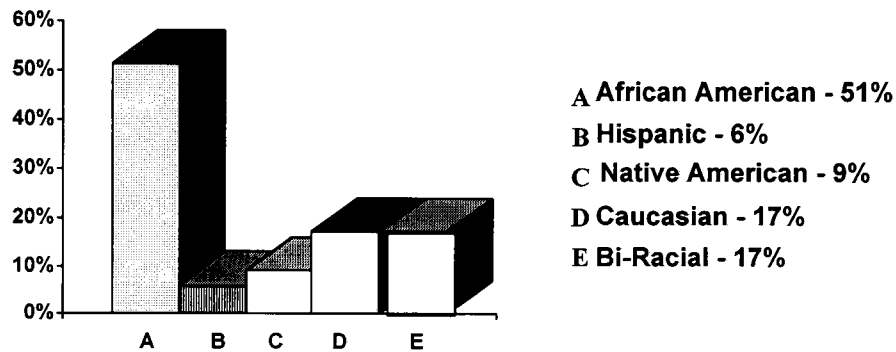
The study population consisted of 35 youth aged 13 to 15 who are currently enrolled in the junior high program at PCYC. Fifty-one percent of the students are female; 49 percent are male. See Table 4.1.

Table 4.1  
Population by Gender at PCYC  
(N=35)



PCYC presently is made up of 83% youth of color. See Table 4.2

Table 4.2  
Population by Ethnicity at PCYC  
(N=35)



Students who attend PCYC junior high school may be dealing with a variety of issues, including behavior problems, truancy, drug and alcohol use, teen pregnancy, single parent families, homelessness, family difficulties, economic difficulties, gang affiliation and/or unsuccessful experiences in the traditional school system.

#### Sampling Procedure

To obtain a sample of this population, a verbal presentation of the study was made during school to PCYC junior high students. During the presentation, the intent of the study was defined, as well as what the study would involve if a student and their parent gave consent. At that time, students were allowed to ask any questions they may have had concerning their participation. See Appendix B for a copy of the verbal presentation made to PCYC students.

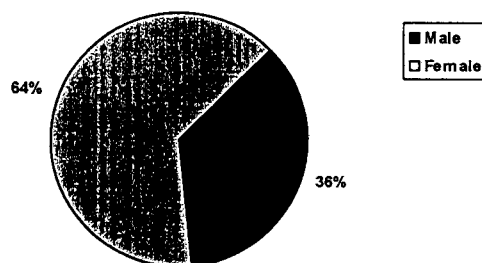
The study sample consisted of those students who consented to participate and whose parents gave informed consent to allow their child to participate. A copy of the consent form is located in Appendix C. Face to face, individual interviews conducted in

January 1996, took place during the school day in a private agency office. Each interview took approximately 30 minutes to complete. Students received full class credit for the time they missed class in order to participate in the study.

### Sampling Selection

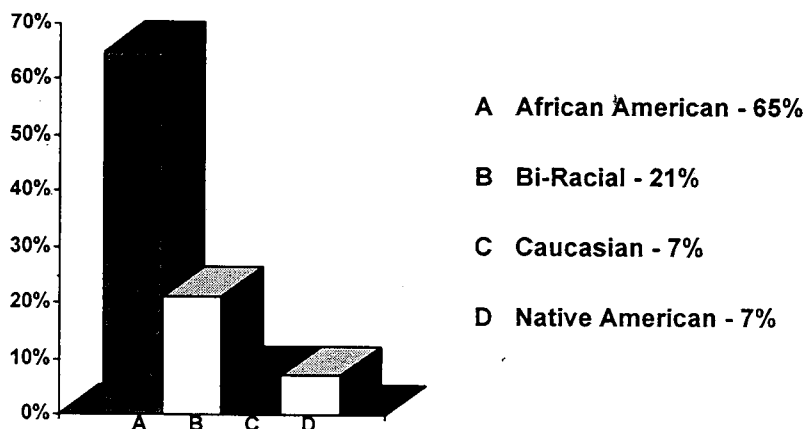
The data to be presented was collected from a sample of 14 PCYC junior high school students. Of these students 64% were female, while 36% were male. See Table 4.3.

Table 4.3  
Study Sample by Gender  
(N=14)



The cultural ethnicity of the study sample was made up of 65% African American, 21% Bi-racial, 7% Caucasian, and 7% Native American. See Table 4.4.

Table 4.4  
Study Sample by Ethnicity  
(N=14)





## Data Collection Instrument

In order to obtain information consistent with the research questions, an interview guide was developed by the researcher. The interview guide consisted of eighteen questions relating to Maslow's physiological, safety, belonging and esteem needs, as well as the theories of Glasser and Erikson. Open-ended questions were designed to allow for students' feedback and comments. A copy of this instrument can be found in Appendix D.

The data collection instrument measured four basic needs in order to determine if these needs were being met for the students at PCYC. One measure was how well students physiological needs were being met at PCYC alternative junior high school. A second measure was how well students' safety needs were being met. The third measure was on how well students' belonging needs were being met. Lastly, the need for self-esteem was measured at PCYC's junior high program. Finally, students were able to offer suggestions on how PCYC could more effectively meet those needs.

## Ethical Protections

Ethical protections in addition to those described in the sampling procedures were employed to protect human subjects and to minimize risk:

1. Staff at PCYC were unaware of which students were participating in the study.
2. Data collected were only examined by the researcher.
  - a. Ensuring that PCYC staff would not have access to individual results from the interviews.

- b. Ensuring that research records were kept in a locked file and in a password secured computer available only to the researcher.
  - c. Ensuring that no information which would identify a particular individual would be used.
  - d. Ensuring that only the researcher would have access to research data which will be destroyed September, 1996;
3. Participants were clearly informed that they had the right to refuse any questions and/or to terminate participation at any time.

#### Data Analysis

The qualitative data which was obtained through the interview guides were organized and categorized according to the specific research questions. Question responses to specific needs were compared for similarities, differences and patterns.

## CHAPTER V

### PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS

The data collected is presented according to the following: how long students have attended Plymouth Christian Youth Center (PCYC) and their reasons for attending; and how well PCYC is addressing student's physiologic, safety, belonging and esteem needs. This data is presented with respect to the measures outlined in Chapter IV.

#### Length at PCYC and Reasons for Attending

Students who participated in the study have attended PCYC for as short as two months and as long as two years. A majority of students stated that the reasons for attending PCYC were due to past school experiences, including low academics, truancy or violence which led to school expulsion. Other reasons given for attending PCYC included its safer environment, lack of gang activity, fewer students and more individualized attention from teachers.

#### How Well PCYC is Addressing Students' Needs

##### Physiological Needs

Physiological needs were measured by addressing the extent to which students were tired and/or hungry while at school.

##### Fatigue

Students were asked to what extent they felt tired during a school day. In response, 43% claimed that they were not tired while at school. Those respondents felt that they were receiving adequate sleep at home, and therefore, were able to feel alert and awake during school hours.

Thirty-six percent of the respondents said that they were tired between one to three times a week, while 29% said they were always tired while at school. According to students, the shared reasons for their fatigue were both school and home-related. Those that were home-related involved sleeping patterns, unstructured bedtimes, and/or eventful weekends. Students who made comments such as: "I don't get a lot of sleep at home"; or "after the weekend I am really tired", often slept in class, which interfered with their educational experiences. In order to address students' sleeping patterns at home, respondents suggested that teachers call students' parents to discuss healthy sleeping patterns.

The environment of PCYC also had an effect on how tired students' were feeling during a typical school day. Several respondents felt that "teachers just make you sit while they talk", which caused them to feel bored, leading to tiredness. By "providing physical activities for students" or "having more interesting things to do like hands-on activities" during classes, students may feel less tired. Other suggestions provided by respondents on how to address students tiredness were: "The school could provide a rest period", "students who are tired should be sent home", and "teach students about getting good sleep".

### Hunger

Fifty-seven percent of the students questioned stated they are never hungry in school. Respondents attributed their lack of hunger to the fact that "I eat at home" or "the school lunches fill me up."

Fourteen percent of the respondents stated they were hungry some of the time, while 29% stated they were hungry all of the time at school. Due to some students not

“eating at home or at school” or “getting hungry between school lunch and breakfast”, 29% of the respondents felt hungry during the school day. Because school begins at 8:30 a.m. and breakfast is not served until 9:15 a.m., students stated that their hunger was due to the fact that “we don’t get breakfast right away.” At PCYC, if students are late for breakfast or lunch they are not allowed to receive that meal as it interferes with designated class time. Some respondents stated they were hungry because “they missed breakfast and/or lunch times.” By “providing snacks during school”, “having breakfast earlier” and “allowing students to have breakfast or lunch even if they are late”, respondents felt students may be less hungry at PCYC.

#### Safety Needs

Safety needs were measured by addressing the existing relationships at PCYC, how physically safe students feel at school, school rules, the level of rule enforcement and the learning environments of the classroom.

#### Relationships Between Staff

The findings indicate that the students at PCYC believe the staff have excellent relationships amongst themselves. All 14 respondents felt that the staff get along very well together. Several positive comments were made regarding the existing staff relationships, such as: "teachers help each other and cooperate" and "teachers talk well between each other." Students viewed the staff relationships as strong since "they team up when there is a problem with a student" and “they have good feelings about each other.”

Respondents felt that staff could work better together by “talking more instead of assuming”, “helping each other more in the classrooms” and “meeting more frequently to discuss how to improve the school”.

### Relationships Between Students and Staff

Twenty-nine percent of the respondents indicated that they believed the staff at PCYC and students worked well together. Due to the small number of students, staff are able to give individualized attention to students. Respondents believed that “students and teachers understand and listen to each other” and that “students and teachers treat each other with respect.” Because teachers at PCYC are able to address students’ academic and behavioral goals more frequently than possibly traditional school teachers, respondents believed that “teachers at PCYC try to keep students on the right track.”

Since “some students and teachers argue a lot” and “some students and teachers don’t get along”, 21% of the respondents believed that the relationships between students and staff were fair. The findings indicate that 50% believed that relationships between the students and staff were poor. Those respondents shared reasons like the “staff are too soft, the kids walk on them”. Others felt like there were “too many disagreements between students and teachers.” Lastly, some believed that at times “teachers don’t always help you when you ask for it”, which signified to them that the relationships between students and staff were not sufficient.

Respondents felt that the relationships between students and staff could be improved. Suggestions around communication were made as to students and teachers “learning to listen to each other better” as well as “learning to solve problems together.” Other respondents believed that relationships may be enhanced if “teachers don’t discuss

my issues in front of other students”, or plainly ,“if teachers would just stay out of my business.” Clearer expectations, such as “time limits as to how long a student should have to leave class when asked to leave”, may be beneficial to the existing relationship between students and staff. Relationships may be strengthened between staff and students by "doing more activities together, so we can get to know each other better."

#### Relationships Between Students and Students

Respondents were asked how well they felt the students at PCYC got along with one another. Seven percent of the respondents believed that students at PCYC had a positive relationship with one another, due to the fact that “students communicate and ask for help from each other.”

Due to reasons, such as, “there is too much arguing, instigating and disrespect”, 29% of the respondents stated that the relationships between students were fair, while 64% believed that student relationships at PCYC were poor. Respondents stated that there were “too many put-downs” between students, while often, “students threaten each other and want to fight.” Others stated, “students have bad attitudes”, and “we are very different”, in regards to personalities and cultural ethnicity which makes it difficult for students to build relationships.

Suggestions regarding what students could do to improve their relationships between one another included, "learn to talk to each other instead of fighting", “learn to listen and help each other”, and “make an effort to get to know everybody.” Respondents who believed that relationships were poor between students felt that if students “stopped play-fighting and gossiping”, they would get along better.

Respondents felt PCYC staff could encourage more positive student relationships by “providing more group activities”, “having more structured rules”, and “not letting kids be so free and independent”. Since some respondents felt there were tensions between students due to differences, they suggested that staff “teach students about racial and gender differences”, so students learn to respect each other. Lastly, it was suggested that PCYC staff implement “a student council or leaders at school who can help students work out their problems.”

### Physical Safety

The findings indicate that 50% of the respondents feel very safe at PCYC. Respondents stated "PCYC is safer than the public schools", and "we are in such a small space, it feels safe". Others felt safe at PCYC because they “trust the teachers and students”, and that it is unlikely that they will “get jumped” during school. One respondent stated that it is unlikely that “someone will come in and shoot me during school, so I feel pretty safe”.

Other findings indicate, that 43% of the respondents felt somewhat safe, while 7% said they did not feel safe at all. In regards to other students, respondents stated they did not feel safe because “arguments often turn into fights” and “some students carry weapons”. In terms of how safe students felt within and outside the actual building of the alternative school, respondents shared that they felt unsafe because “anybody from the outside could just walk in”, and “inside the building I feel safe, but not outside during breaks and lunch.”



The respondents suggested that, in order to make the environment at PCYC safer, the staff at PCYC "should come up with some way of checking kids for guns", in addition to "addressing gang-related activity" that occurs during school. Because many of respondents felt that arguments between students occur when teachers leave the classrooms, they suggested that "teachers shouldn't leave us alone in the classroom." Other suggestions to PCYC staff were "problems should try to be solved without suspensions because suspensions make students really angry, which can turn into violence."

Regarding the building, respondents suggested that PCYC would be a safer place "if the walks were shoveled" and "the back door locked, so that people from the outside can't get in." When looking at the structure of the program, PCYC may be able to provide a safer environment by "having smaller classrooms with fewer students", so there is a smaller student-to-teacher ratio.

### Rules

The findings indicate that 79% of the respondents felt there were sufficient established rules at PCYC, which they considered to be fair. "We are given chances and choices when we break the rules as to what the consequences should be." Other respondents felt "the rules are free and open." Several respondents shared that when compared to the traditional school systems, PCYC tended to have fewer rules.

Twenty-one percent of the respondents stated that they felt PCYC did not have enough school rules. Some students were "not sure what the school rules are" and that "students don't follow the rules". Others shared concerns that "staff do not follow

through on consequences when students break the rules” and existing school rules “need to be stricter”.

The primary suggestions made regarding the rules at PCYC concerned student involvement. Respondents felt that its important that students be involved in establishing the school rules, as well as consequences for breaking those rules. They believed that if students are involvemed in this process, everyone would know what the rules are, and what will happen if they are broken.

### Rule Enforcement

When respondents were asked if they felt the staff at PCYC enforced the rules equally and consistently, 14% stated that they believed that staff were being fair and consistent when enforcing rules.

Eighty six percent of the respondents felt staff were not being consistent when enforcing rules in that the consequences of breaking rules varied. "Kids here aren't treated fairly or equally because certain kids get different rules, and that is not fair." Others felt, “teachers see rules differently, so some are easier on you than others.” In addition, respondents felt that teachers let “particular students slide”, causing respondents to believe that staff are not enforcing the rules equally amongst the student body.

To address the concerns about unfair and inconsistent rule enforcement, respondents suggested that there “should be a principal or leader who makes the final decision” when there is a problem with a student breaking the rules. “Letting everyone know what the rules are”, as well as “asking kids what they think the consequence should be” may help to eliminate the inconsistency which exists with the enforcement of rules. Respondents suggested that the staff “should enforce the rules the same for everyone” and “when they

give a consequence or warning, they should keep their word and be sure to follow through.”

### Classroom Environment

With respect to the classroom environment at PCYC, respondents were asked if they felt that students were involved in learning, or that they were engaging in behaviors that interfered with their learning. Seven percent believed that students were involved in learning. “People who want to learn just do their work and ignore those kids who are goofing around.”

Situations like “too much playing around during class like teasing and play-fighting” led 93% of the respondents to believe that there are situations that are distracting them from learning. During class, “kids don’t do their work, they do irritating things, like pound on the table while I am trying to work.” Some “kids cuss at teachers and just get up in the middle of class and leave.” “I don’t think some kids want to learn, they just refuse to do their work.”

Respondents believed that the staff could create a more satisfying learning environment for students. With regards to students’ behavior, they shared ideas, such as “removing the disruptive students and calling their parents” or “putting the students who want to learn in one room, and those who do not in another.” Another suggestion was to “have consequences for negative behavior that occurs in class, like after-school detention, or a time-out.”

Suggestions as to how the program could provide more control in the classroom were to “develop a warning system” that would allow students the opportunity to change

their behaviors. Others believed that “having more meetings with parents” regarding their child’s behavior in the classroom may help to deter some of the acting out. A final suggestion regarding programming, was “not to change our classes every month”, as some respondents felt that those changes may be causing disruptions within the classrooms.

In connection with classroom activities, respondents suggested that “teachers should explain our assignments better”, which may help students to feel more connected with the educational activity occurring in the classroom. Other ideas were to “pay more attention to those students who are doing good and want to learn, instead of those who are acting”, and “to work more with students one-on-one.” A final suggestion regarding the structure of the school day was to “stop letting students out early”, as respondents believed that this lack of structure may be causing uncertainty in regards to classroom expectations.

### Belonging Needs

Belonging needs were addressed by measuring students’ abilities to build friendships with peers, students’ feelings of pride regarding PCYC, and students’ abilities to establish relationships with the staff at PCYC.

### Friendship Building

Forty-three percent of the respondents stated that they believed it has been difficult making friends at PCYC. These respondents felt that students “aren’t nice to each other” and “kids act all tough and hard.” Frequently, “students from past schools stick together”, and therefore, it is difficult for some students to get to know their peers. Due to students’ differences in values and culture, students believed it was difficult to build

relationships with each other. Other respondents felt that in order to make friends, “you gotta be like them and talk like them”, which may cause students to isolate from their peers.

“Since it is so small here, it is easy to talk to everybody” was one reason given by the 57% of the respondents who felt that it has been fairly easy making friends at PCYC. Due to the fact that “we all have the same thing in common, we all go to an alternative school”, some students feel bonded to their peers.

Suggestions given to PCYC staff involved ways in which staff could support friendship building between students. During classes, teachers may want to “talk with students about how to make friends”, and “discussing students’ similarities”. By allowing students to “work in large groups more often”, as well as “having students who don’t know each other well work together”, relationships may strengthen between peers. “Having after-school activities or groups, like a friendship group, might be a way that students could make friends at school.”

### Student Pride

Seventy-one percent of the respondents stated that they were proud to be students of PCYC junior high school. The following reasons were given: “it is fun, we do activities”; “I like it here; we get one on one attention”; and “it is better here than the public schools.” Other respondents felt that PCYC was a place “for me to bring up my credits”, and shared feelings of appreciation towards PCYC. Being able to “take trips and pick your own classes” was another cause of student pride. It seems PCYC has a respected reputation among youth in the community, as respondents shared that “other

kids I know want to come to school here”, enhancing their pride in terms of PCYC affiliation.

Due to the labeling and stigmatism that often comes with attending an alternative school, 29% stated that they were not proud to be affiliated with PCYC. “I can’t be proud because it is an alternative school, a school for bad kids or kids who can’t do regular school work.” Going to school at PCYC, “labels me as someone who couldn’t make it in a public school”. Another respondent believed that “it is boring here, we don’t do enough, the public schools have more to offer.”

Respondents made the following suggestions regarding ways to increase PCYC students’ pride. Respondents believed that “the building needs to be cleaned up” and “we need some new tables”. Suggestions to teachers were to, “make our work a little harder” and “start letting us take our school work home”. Others believed that, if “teachers and students respected each other more”, students may feel better about attending PCYC. A program suggestion was made “to connect the school more with the community, so that the students could get more involved with the community, and the community will know about our school.”

#### Establishing Relationships with PCYC Staff

The last area addressed in regards to belonging needs concerned students’ relationships with PCYC staff. All 14 respondents indicated that it has been extremely easy getting to know the staff at PCYC. Respondents supported this by comments such as: “teachers here are nice and friendly”; “they talk to us individually”; “they are fun and joke around with us”; and, “they are good listeners and give us a lot of attention.”

By having more “group activities with students and teachers”, as well as “more one-on-one talks with students”, respondents felt students could get to know teachers better. Another suggestion in terms of building student/teacher relationships was for “teachers to share more about their lives with us”. Finally, “having a special introduction with staff and new students” when a student starts at PCYC may enforce relation building between students and staff.

### Esteem Needs

Esteem needs were measured by addressing students' involvement in decision making, the amount and content of feedback students were receiving regarding their school behavior and academic performance, as well as how academically challenged students feel.

### Decision-Making

In terms of how involved students felt they were in the decision-making processes at school, 36% stated they felt very involved. Due to “the opportunities you are given to speak your mind or pick your classes” or “the choices you are given regarding staying in class or leaving if you act up,” respondents felt they were given ample opportunities to be involved in decisions regarding their school experiences.

Opinions like “staff don’t involve you in decisions that regard you” and “staff decide for you, they don’t ask you”, led 64% of the respondents to believe that students have little input around decision making at school.

Respondents felt that PCYC staff could increase student participation in decision-making by “encouraging students to get more involved,” and by “asking our opinions and

input more.” One suggestion was to implement “a voting system” which would allow students to have input on daily activities and events at school.

#### Feedback Regarding Students' School Behavior

Regarding self-esteem, respondents were asked if they knew how PCYC staff felt about student behavior during school. Twenty-nine percent stated that they did know how staff felt about their behavior in school. Respondents stated they knew this because "my advisor at school tells me." Others stated that "teachers tell me about both my negative and positive behaviors at school."

Conversely, 71% stated they were unclear or did not know how PCYC staff felt about their behavior at school. These respondents indicated that "teachers never tell me and I don't ask".

Respondents suggested that PCYC staff could improve how they inform students concerning their school behavior with "better ways of communicating". By developing a weekly or bi-weekly procedure of informing students, or by writing students about what areas they need work in, staff may close the communication gap. Due to comments like "teachers need to get off my back and quit telling me about all of my negative behaviors", it is apparent that providing students with feedback with which they could utilize their strengths to create positive changes in their behavior, would be valuable. Involving students' parents and/or guardians may increase communication concerning students' behaviors in school. Ways to bridge parents and PCYC may be by “calling my parents with information about me," or "come over to my house in person and talk to my mom."



### Feedback Regarding Students' School Performance

When asked similar question addressing the feedback students receive concerning their school performance fifty percent stated that they knew how the staff at PCYC felt about their performance in school. Respondents stated that "during advisory my advisor tells us how we are doing in our classes." Others shared that their "teachers write it down for me and tell me what I need to catch up on."

The other 50% of the respondents, stated they were unsure or were not aware of how staff felt about their school performance "staff don't acknowledge my school performance," and "no one updates me on how I am doing."

The suggestions which students gave to improve the feedback of school performance, tended to be on improving communication techniques. Respondents believed that teachers could provide information to students by "writing down how we are doing in our classes everyday", "remind us of our missing assignments once a week" and "telling me how I am doing in the middle of the month so I have time to improve". Including parents and/or guardians by "keeping my parents informed by sending out report cards once a month," was another suggestion given to improve feedback in regards to students' academic performance.

### Amount of Work

The last area addressed regarding to self-esteem concerned how students felt about the amount of work they were assigned at school. Only 7% felt that PCYC staff assigned too much school work.

Thirty six percent stated they believed the amount of work assigned was just enough, while the remaining 57% indicated that they were not given enough work to feel academically challenged. The latter respondents shared opinions such as: "It is a vacation here compared to the public schools", and "I don't feel like I learn enough here". On a personal level some respondents believed that they "weren't being challenged enough", and ways to correct this may be by "letting us work beyond the assignments given at our own pace". Others believed that they would feel more challenged if they "were given homework assignments to work on outside of class."

Finally, students were asked if they could do more work, what would they like to do? All respondents gave ideas that included both academic and alternative learning experiences. The following academic subjects were mentioned: "geography, English, gym, algebra, reading, art, history, science, social studies and math." Alternative experiences included: "use of the dictionary", "fun work, like games", "hand on projects" and "puzzles".

### Overview

The data which was collected during this study provides a significant amount of information in regards to the needs, based on Maslow's need hierarchy, of the students who attend PCYC's alternative junior high school. In the following chapter, a discussion of the feasibility of meeting these needs based on available program resources will be discussed.

## CHAPTER VI

### DISCUSSION

This chapter contains three sections: (a) the relevance of the findings as they pertain to the research questions, (b) the findings compared to the literature reviewed in Chapter II, and (c) a discussion regarding the limitations of this study.

#### Relevance to Research Questions

The research sought to answer three sets of questions. The first research question against which the data was evaluated was:

- What are the needs of the students who are attending Plymouth Christian Youth Center's (PCYC) alternative junior high school?

Based on the existing literature of students' needs, Maslow's needs hierarchy and the findings of this study, it can be concluded that students who attend PCYC do have specific needs in the areas of physiological, safety, belonging and esteem. This is discussed further on pages 44-46.

Secondly, the research asked:

- Are the students who are attending PCYC's alternative junior high school getting their needs met?

Before addressing the specific needs that were measured in this research, it seems important to discuss the belief as to where the responsibility lies in meeting students needs. How feasible is it for PCYC junior high school to address and meet the needs of their students given the amount of available resources? We must take into account the family systems and address their responsibility in meeting childrens' needs at home in addition to working with the alternative school in addressing childrens' needs within the

school. Consideration must be given to the intense needs of alternative school students most of whom may be considered at-risk. At-risk students may be dealing with a multitude of issues which realistically may not be able to be addressed by the PCYC's alternative school program. We must question how responsible are alternative school students in ensuring that their needs are being met within the school. Finally, we should question the ability of PCYC staff to address students' needs based on the quantity of students being served. Is it a realistic expectation for staff to provide a quality educational experience with the current amount of students enrolled in the program? These concerns are important to consider when discussing the findings of this research.

The findings suggest that due to the current program structure, specific student needs are adequately being addressed, while other specific needs are not being satisfied. This may be due to the issues discussed above. A closer look at Maslow's needs is further discussed.

#### Physiological Needs

The findings indicate that the majority of students do not experience a great deal of fatigue and/or hunger while at school. These students are getting adequate sleep at home in addition to eating before school. Those students, approximately 29%, who are experiencing fatigue and/or hunger during school tend not to be practicing healthy sleeping or eating habits at home. Overall, it appears PCYC is addressing students hunger by providing school breakfast and lunch. In addition, varied classroom experiences throughout the school day help to eliminate students feelings of fatigue.

### Safety Needs

In order for a school environment to successfully support human endeavors, students need to feel safe and secure. Environments that are unstable, physically threatening or include uncomfortable levels of stress tend to be unhealthy places which hamper productivity. If students safety needs are being met, it can be concluded that the school environment is offering a place with control and order without being oppressive.

Based on the findings, it would appear that, overall, respondents feel that while at school they are physically safe. This need for safety has definite impact on students' willingness to attend school and may increase school attendance, while decreasing potential truant behavior.

Concerning the existing relationships at PCYC, the majority of the respondents stated that they felt the staff at PCYC maintained healthy relationships, but that the students had difficulty working successfully with the staff as well as with their peers. These conflicting relationships between students and staff, and students and students, may be causing tension within the classrooms, interfering with positive communication and stability.

In order for students to feel safe in their environment, schools must be able to provide structure. Structure at PCYC was discussed in terms of the context of school rules, rule enforcement and classroom environments. The majority of respondents felt that although there were adequate rules which existed, those rules were not being enforced equally or fairly by PCYC program staff. In addition, the majority of respondents believed that current classroom environments did not foster safe, structured learning environments.

### Belonging Needs

In order for students' belonging needs to be met, school environments must emphasize relationship building, feelings of belonging, as well as social bonding. If these needs are not adequately addressed, it is unlikely that educational engagement will occur.

Providing students with a sense of belonging is a definite strength of PCYC. Based on the findings, it appears that the majority of respondents believed that their needs around belonging were adequately being met at school. The majority of respondents indicated that they have been able to make friends at school, that they are proud to be students of PCYC, and in addition, have strong feelings for the ease of establishing relationships with PCYC staff. These results imply that respondents at PCYC feel a sense of connection to PCYC which is an essential part of a student's learning experience.

### Esteem Needs

In order for students to experience satisfying school experiences, school environments must be places which provide students with many avenues and opportunities for success. If educational staff recognizes and emphasizes students' achievements, students may feel encouraged and become involved in their educational experiences. Students need to feel that they are capable and worthwhile individuals in order to develop a healthy self-concept and self-esteem.

The findings suggest that PCYC may want to re-evaluate the way in which it involves students in decisions regarding their school experience. Currently, the majority of respondents felt they were not involved in making decisions which involved students.

Also, several respondents felt that the procedure for receiving feedback from teachers regarding their school behavior and performance is not frequent enough nor consistent.

Finally, a large number of students stated that they were not challenged by the amount of work that was being assigned by the PCYC academic curriculum. Not feeling challenged at school may cause students to feel intellectually oppressed, limiting their academic potential.

Thirdly, this research asked:

- How can PCYC more effectively meet the needs of their students?

In all programs it is crucial to recognize the existing strengths of the programs, so that these strengths can be utilized to provide more effective programming. Within PCYC junior high, strengths should be acknowledged and built upon, especially in regards to addressing students' needs. During the interviews, student respondents provided valuable suggestions as to how PCYC may more efficiently meet their needs. These suggestions are located in the presentation of findings, Chapter V. The researcher also provides possible recommendations to PCYC to consider in order to address student needs. These recommendations can be found in the following chapter, Conclusions and Recommendations.

### Comparisons to Literature Review

A review of the current literature concerning alternative schools and students' needs indicates that students who attend alternative schools come from a variety of cultural and socio-economic backgrounds. In addition, the literature states that alternative students may be dealing with a multitude of issues including potential school drop-out, family

difficulties and negative school experiences. Due to the unique characteristics of alternative schools, the literature suggests that these types of school environments are more apt to meet students' needs. Existing literature indicates that, in order for students to have satisfying and successful school experiences, their needs must be recognized and addressed within the schools.

The findings of this study appear to be congruent with the existing literature regarding why students attend alternative schools and their feelings towards alternative schools. As the literature states, some students at PCYC are not enrolled by choice but were referred by school counselors or probation officers. Other students have self-selected PCYC, as it offers smaller classrooms and more individualized attention which was found in the literature as positive aspects of alternative schools. Lastly, some respondents mentioned existing negative aspects of alternative schools as discussed in the literature, for example, being labeled as a "bad" kid or "someone who cannot do the school work in the public schools."

Existing literature supports that, in general, alternative schools, when compared to traditional schools, tend to more effectively meet the needs of their students. This ability to more effectively address students' needs is accredited to the unique characteristics found within alternative school environments. This research did not study how well PCYC addressed students needs compared to the traditional schools, so it cannot be concluded that the findings of this study support or do not support a more satisfying school experience at PCYC alternative school compared to the public school systems.



## Limitations

There are several limitations which must be taken into consideration concerning this study. Due to the small sample size, which was only 40% of the student body at PCYC, the capacity to generalize from this study is questionable. In addition, the study sample was skewed in comparison to the study population as the sample was predominantly female. If the sample had been more gender balanced, the results may have been different.

Other noted limitations in this study involve the way in which students responded. Because of the nature of the study, students may have responded in a socially desirable manner. The format of the interview questions may have been interrupted differently by respondents, therefore, affecting the way in which students responded. Lastly, the emotional state of the respondent at the time of the interview must be considered. For example, the feelings which the respondents may have had regarding their reasons for attending an alternative school, current relationships with the staff at PCYC, time of day and year this study was conducted, or mood of the respondent at the time of the interview may have influenced the respondent's answers.

The researcher's personal biases or interpretations of the data must be considered as a limitation to this study. A final limitation is the fact that this study cannot be generalized to other existing alternative schools since it focuses specifically on PCYC junior high alternative programs.

Although there are noted limitations, this study contains important implications for social work practice.

## CHAPTER VII

### CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This chapter contains three sections: (a) implications for social work practice, (b) implications for future research, and (c) specific recommendations for PCYC's alternative junior high school.

#### Implications for Social Work Practice

Important implications for social work practice are provided by this study. As more students are struggling with truancy, school drop-out, poor academic skills and school violence, there seems to be an increasing need for alternative school programs. Social workers, consequently, must be able to appropriately identify programs that will offer students a successful school experience. In order to make appropriate referrals, social workers must be knowledgeable about the characteristics of alternative schools, the negative and positive aspects of alternative schools, as well as the needs of the students who attend alternative school programs.

It is imperative that social workers who work within alternative school settings, have a clear sense of the needs of students. Having this knowledge will allow social workers to develop holistic programs that incorporate these needs. In addition, social workers who recognize the needs of the students will be more efficient in utilizing and implementing community resources. By way of knowledge of students' needs, social workers will be more effective at addressing the existing systems in students' lives, as well as advocating for students within their schools, homes and communities. Lastly,

with the knowledge of students' needs, social workers may be able to bridge existing gaps between the family and educational systems, so that these two systems may work in collaboration on common goals.

#### Implications for Future Research

Although this research adds to the existing body of literature regarding students' needs within alternative schools, further research is needed.

Within PCYC, this study could be replicated at the agency's other two alternative high schools. This information would provide PCYC with a broader knowledge of how well the agency is serving the youth who attend their alternative schools. In addition, PCYC's alternative junior high school could do further research which focuses on a specifically identified need to strengthen existing programs. A final study could be conducted in order to look at the social needs of youth who are attending PCYC.

Further research could be conducted to address how well alternative schools and families are collaborating in order to recognize students' needs within both the home and school environments. On a larger scale, this study could be implemented to several Minneapolis alternative schools so that comparisons could be made on program effectiveness in terms of recognizing and meeting students' needs.

#### Recommendations

Several recommendations can be made to PCYC alternative junior high school as well as other alternative schools, as a result of the information obtained in this study. It seems appropriate to mention that these suggestions may not all be feasible due to the agency's financial resources, the amount of available staff time, the high needs of the

student population, the location of PCYC in the community, as well as the allocated space within PCYC for the alternative junior high school. The respondents suggestions during this research, are formulated by the researcher in terms of .

- Physiological Needs:

1. Provide education to students on healthy eating and sleeping patterns.
2. Utilize a community food bank as a way of providing low-cost snacks to students.

- Safety Needs:

1. Provide training for students and staff on conflict resolution and problem solving.
2. Incorporate a peer mediation program.
3. Provide education on cultural and gender differences.
4. Allow for more structured group activities.
5. Have a designated staff outside on all school breaks and lunches.
6. Keep junior high doors locked from the outside during school hours.
7. Provide written rules to new students.
8. Develop a process that would include students in the development of rules and consequences.
9. Post rules within the school.
10. Maintain consistency among staff regarding rule enforcement.
11. Establish a warning system for inappropriate behaviors in the class room.

12. Develop a time-out procedure for inappropriate behaviors.
13. Focus more attention on those students who are completing their assignments and attending classes.

- Belonging Needs:

1. Provide after school activities, groups or clubs.
2. Educate students on how to build and maintain friendships.
3. Connect students with the outside community.
4. Maintain a clean environment.
5. Discuss students possible feelings of inadequacy or being "labeled" due to attending an alternative school, while incorporating the positive aspects of alternative education.

- Esteem Needs:

1. Organize a student council.
2. Encourage students' input on decisions when appropriate.
3. Provide weekly written feedback reports to students regarding school behavior and performance.
4. Provide monthly written feedback, as well as a phone call to parents, focusing on students' strengths.
5. Have the school social worker attend a home visit monthly to link families with the school.

6. Re-evaluate the current curriculum to access age and grade appropriateness.
7. Survey students to find out about what they are interested in learning.
8. Allow students to partake in individual learning plans which may incorporate out of school assignments.

### Conclusion

This study validates the importance of identifying and recognizing students' needs in order to provide positive school experiences for youth. As the needs of youth are changing, so must the existing educational programs. In response to students who are dissatisfied and/or unsuccessful in the traditional schools, alternative programs, such as PCYC, are working towards developing an environment and curriculum which is consistent with the needs of their students.



Appendix A

October 27, 1995

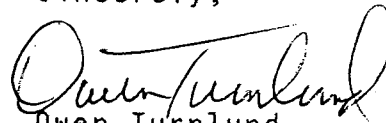
Department of Social Work  
Augsburg College  
2211 Riverside Avenue South  
Minneapolis, MN 55454

Dear Augsburg Staff,

Chrislee has asked that I confirm in writing that she can do research for her thesis using our junior high students as subjects. I would certainly agree to this proposal and only ask that she keep Maureen Walsh appraised of her topic and methodology.

We benefit from this kind of research both in learning from its finding and being able to communicate with the community about our work.

Sincerely,

  
Owen Turnlund  
Executive Director

**PLYMOUTH CHRISTIAN YOUTH CENTER**

2301 Oliver Avenue North / Minneapolis, Minnesota 55411-1878 / (612) 522-6501

Appendix B

Consent Form

**Looking at the Needs of Alternative School Students**

Dear

My name is Chrislee Jacobs. I am currently a graduate student at Augsburg College and an intern at Plymouth Christian Youth Center. I am conducting research in order to complete a large paper. I have chosen to assess the needs of the junior high students at Plymouth Christian Youth Center. The results of this research will be used to offer program suggestions to Plymouth Christian Youth Center.

I need your permission and the permission of your son/daughter in order to include your son/daughter in the research. Enclosed you will find a consent form. The consent form explains what I would ask your child to do, how I will use that information, and how you can contact me or my advisor should you have any questions.

Your child is invited to be in a research study regarding the needs of alternative school students. Your son/daughter was selected as a possible participant because he/she is a student at Plymouth Christian Youth Center's Junior High School. We ask that you read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to allow your child to be in the study. **If you decide to allow your child to participate, he/she is free to withdraw at any time.** This study will begin in December, 1995 and will end no later than September, 1996.

The purpose of this study is to assess the needs of the students at Plymouth Christian Youth Center's Junior High School. If you agree to allow your child to be in this study we would ask him/her to participate in a twenty minute interview which will address how well Plymouth Christian Youth Center is meeting your child's physiological, safety, belonging and self-esteem needs.

Your child will receive credit for the class period from which he/she will be excused to complete the testing and the interview; however, if his/her teacher decides that he/she cannot afford to miss class time due to lack of attendance or non-completion of work, he/she may be asked to complete these tasks outside of class time (i.e. before or after school). Your child may decline to answer any interview question that he/she may feel uncomfortable with and still continue to participate in the study. Although the interview is directed to your child's school experience, some private information may come up. You should know that the researcher is a mandated reporter and is required to report any comments of this kind.



The researcher has taken every effort to minimize risk by:

1. Making the records examined for this study, private;
2. Ensuring that the thesis will not include identifying information about any participant.
3. Ensuring that teachers will not have access to individual results forms the testing or the interview.
4. Ensuring that the research records will be kept in a locked file and in a password secured computer.
5. Ensuring that only the researcher will have access to the records which will be destroy by September, 1996.
6. Ensuring that PCYC staff will not know who is participating in the study.

Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Augsburg College or with Plymouth Christian Youth Center. If you have any questions you may contact me at Plymouth Christian Youth Center, 522-6501, or my thesis advisor, Curt Paulsen, at Augsburg College, 330-1621.

Please detach the bottom of this form, returning it in the enclosed self-addressed stamped envelope. Retain the top part for your records.

Thank you for your time and consideration of participation in this study.

**STATEMENT OF CONSENT:**

We have read the above information. We have asked questions and have received answers. We consent to participate in this study. \_\_\_\_\_

Signature of parent/guardian \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

Signature of student \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix C

### **Presentation to PCYC Junior High Students**

I am here today to ask for your help. As you probably know, I am a graduate student at Augsburg College in the Social Work department. I am working on a research project called a thesis. To do a thesis I have to gather some information then write a report about what I found. What I would like to do for this project concerns you and this is why I am here. For my thesis, I would like to see what is necessary for you at PCYC in order for you to be satisfied. I would also like to hear your opinions on how you think PCYC could provide an environment that would cause you to have a good learning experience.

In order for me to include you in this research, I need your permission and the permission of your parent/guardian. What I would like to do is to interview you to get your opinion on how well PCYC is meeting your needs as a student. This would require about twenty minutes of your time. You will receive credit for the time you would have to be taken out of class. If your teacher feels that you should not miss class in order to participate in the study, we will schedule time either during the lunch hour, or before or after school for the interview.

During the time of this project, I will be meeting with all students with your permission. Those who have given permission to participate in the research will complete the interview, others will just do a check-in. This procedure will make it so the staff at PCYC do not know who is not in the study. Your name will not be used in any report that I will write, nor will any individual information you give me be made public in a way in which someone could tell that it was your answer. Your teachers will not have access to your individual interview answers. You will not be penalized in any way if you choose not to participate and you can quit at any time during the study. Information that I receive will be stored in a locked file cabinet and in a password controlled computer until September, 1996. Also, be aware that I am a mandated reporter within PCYC, which means that if you were to tell me about instances of abuse or neglect, I would have to report it. Does anyone have any questions regarding this research project?

I am mailing a consent form to your parents today that explains the details of the study. Please have them read it and please read it yourself. Do not sign the form until you have all of your questions answered and you are sure you want to participate. I cannot let you participate unless your parents sign and return the form.

Do you have any questions right now?

If not, please feel free to ask me in private, or give me a call. Have your parents call me if they have any questions.

## Appendix D

### Interview Guide

Gender:

1. How long have you attended PCYC?
2. What influenced your decision to come to PCYC and how do you feel about that?
3. How tired are you while you are at school?
  - 3a. How could PCYC deal with your tiredness?
4. How hungry do you feel while you are at school?
  - 4a. What could PCYC do to deal with your hunger?
5. How well do you think the staff work together?
  - 5a. How do you think the staff could work better together?
6. How well do you think the staff and students work together?
  - 6a. How do you think the staff and students could work better together?
7. How well do you think students and students work together?
  - 7a. How do you think students and students could work better together?
8. How physically safe do you feel at PCYC?
  - 8a. How do you think PCYC could be a safer place?
9. How do feel about the rules at PCYC?
10. Do staff enforce the rules equally all of the time?
  - 10a. How do you think PCYC could enforce the rules more fairly or equally?
11. In the classroom are most students involved in learning, or are they doing things that get in the way of your learning?
  - 11a. What changes could be made that would allow you to learn more in your classroom?

12. How has it been making friends at PCYC?
- 12a. What changes could be made to allow you to make friends?
13. Are you proud to be a student at PCYC?
- 13a. What changes could be made to make you prouder of PCYC?
14. How has it been getting to know the staff at PCYC?
- 14a. What could PCYC staff do to make it easier for you to get to know them?
15. How involved are students in making decisions at PCYC?
- 15a. What changes could PCYC make to allow students to be more involved in making decisions?
16. Do you know how staff feel about your behavior in school?
- 16a. How could the information you are receiving about your school behavior from the staff be improved?
17. Do you know how staff feel about how you are doing in your classes?
- 17a. How could the information you are receiving about your school performance from the staff be improved?
18. How do you feel about the amount of work and assignments you are given as a student?
- 18a. If you could do more work, what would you like to do?

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